

Positioning product longevity in Norwegian environmental policy

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Abstract: With an increasing interest in the circular economy, current environmental policies in Europe aim to prepare economies for a ‘green’ transition. Contrary to circularity, however, product longevity has yet to become a policy buzzword. To date, circularity has largely been operationalised as waste management, and circular strategies tend to neglect the everyday use of products. In this paper, we explore how product longevity has been positioned in Norwegian environmental policy over the past 20 years. By doing so, we aim to understand why product longevity seems to fall behind compared to concepts such as circularity, recycling, dematerialisation, and efficiency, and what we can do to change it. The data material consists of three sets of document analyses: 1) party programmes from six political parties in Norway 2000-2020, 2) Official documents from the Parliament and the Government 2000-2020, and 3) newspaper articles 2000-2020. A thematic analysis was used to study the timeframe, contexts and policy instruments in which product longevity appears. Our findings show that the concept is hardly mentioned in Norwegian environmental policy or public debate. However, there is a significant increase from 2016-2017 in combination with circularity but only at a theoretical level while concrete policy instruments are still lacking. We also see a clear link between focus on product longevity and on consumers and consumption activities. In conclusion, we therefore argue that circular economy policies must be oriented to an everyday life perspective on consumption and consumers to develop effective instruments to increase product longevity.

Introduction

Over the past decade, environmental policies in the European Union, member states and associated countries have been framed within the Circular Economy (CE) line of thought. The basic argument of the circular economy is to move away from a linear model of production, consumption, and disposal, to a circular model generating new resources from waste. The core principles include concepts such as reduce, reuse, and recycle (the 3Rs), as well as redesign, remanufacture and recover (Kirchherr, Reike, & Hekkert, 2017). At a theoretical level, the CE moves up the waste management hierarchy by aiming at preventing waste, not merely using waste to generate resources. In academia, circular economy ideas were linked to product longevity in the 1970s and 80s through the work by Robert Lund (e.g. Lund, 1977) and Walter Stahel (including Stahel, 1986, 1994, 1998; Stahel, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019; Stahel & Reday-Mulvey, 1981; Stahel & Reday, 1976). Their basic idea was shifting design, production, and consumption processes from a linear cradle-to-grave and towards a cradle-to-cradle principle where extended product life is considered in all phases (Cooper, 2020).

The EU's use of CE concepts has however been widely criticised from scholars across disciplines. Despite principal support of the concepts at a general level, uptake is significantly lagging (Fitch-Roy, Benson, & Monciardini, 2020; Hartley, van Santen, & Kirchherr, 2020). According to Stahel (2013), the insights from product lifetime research have only now slowly started to transcend into policy-making, yet policymakers still tend to focus on singular issues and less on holistic solutions across sectors and they are, as Stahel phrases it, “geared to overcome economic problems by promoting growth in the industrial production economy” (p.1). Gregson, Crang, Fuller, and Holmes (2015, p. 220), argue that the EU economizes the circularity concept by stating that “the key move is to view nature not as an uncoded externality but as a set of stocks, potential resources, flows and services that can be measured and assigned a value”. In doing so, the market becomes an important domain and consumers in those markets key actors to accomplish the circular economy transition. According to Mylan, Holmes, and Paddock (2016), there is however a lack of attention to the domestic domain, which is crucial to the enactment and change of consumption practices, and where many practices that affect

product longevity takes place. While the endpoints including design, production and waste are given much attention in the form of concrete policy instruments, Welch, Keller, and Mandich (2016, p. 25) note that “the centrality of the domain of use and consumption is routinely acknowledged in reports and policy statements”, whilst offering no political instruments to address the use phase.

Norway has followed the EU’s uptake of the circular economy as its core concept for future environmental policy. In 2021, the government plans to launch their first circular economy strategy, very much inspired by the “New Circular Economy Action Plan” (European Commission, 2020). In this paper, we study the concept of product longevity in Norwegian environmental policy based on political party programmes, official policies and media texts over the past 20 years. In doing so, we get in-depth knowledge of how one single concept, product longevity, is positioned within the much more general idea of environmentalism, sustainability and circularity, as well as its development over time.

The paper starts with presenting the methods, data material and analytical strategy. We then explore three types of positionings: historical, contextual, and operationalisations to policy instruments. We conclude by arguing for greater attentiveness to consumption as an array of everyday activities, which in turn might enable more efficient policy instruments than those proposed under the EU’s understanding of the circular economy.

Methods and data material

The paper uses document analysis to conduct a systematic evaluation of product longevity in Norwegian environmental policy. Documents can be referred to as social, in the sense that they are produced, shared, developed and discarded within a social context (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). With this framing in mind, the analytical procedure has consisted of (i) *selecting* relevant documents, (ii) *evaluating* their content by means of thematic and theoretical concepts, and (iii) *synthesizing* the content of the documents (Bowen, 2009).

The main source of documents used in this paper is political party programmes of four of the biggest political parties in Norway (Høyre – the Liberal conservative party, Venstre – the Liberal party, Arbeiderpartiet – the Social democratic party, and SV – the socialist party) in the time periods 2001-2005, 2005-2009, 2009-2013, 2013-2017; the last one covering

the period until 2021. Høyre and Arbeiderpartiet have been the dominant parties in the period and the bases for coalition governments, while Venstre and SV have aimed at becoming the main environmental alternative on the right and left side, respectively. In addition, we have analysed the most recent party programs (2017) of Fremskrittspartiet, a “right wing” and partly liberalist party and Miljøpartiet de Grønne (MDG), an environmental or “green” party. The programs are either available online or have been sent to us by the party administrations. 22 programs have been examined.

The party programmes are supplemented by two further sources. The first is all official documents from the Norwegian parliament and government web archives that contains the word “product longevity” (or similar phrases), which is only seven documents between 1996-2021, four of which are published between 2016-2021. The second is all media texts between 2000-2020 that contains the word “product longevity” (or similar phrases). These were identified using the Norwegian media archive Retriever. The material consists of 45 texts, of which 27 were published in 2019-2021. Before 2019, there have been between 0-3 texts each year.

Evaluation and synthesising have been of a thematic and discursive character (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Kohlbacher, 2006). We have identified the occurrence and placement of the longevity concept in each document, their social, cultural and political contexts, and the dominant societal discourses that longevity is placed within, outside, or in the outskirts of.

Although document analysis is an efficient, cost-effective and easily conductible method, we are aware of biased selectivity in our focus on product longevity. Moreover, we have strategically selected the timeframe 2000-2020 based on an assumption that longevity is little mentioned in the previous decades. When relevant, documents before 2000 are included.

Historical positioning: Few mentions before 2017

For three of the parties we followed from 2001, product longevity appears for the first time at the end of our period, in the 2017-2021 programs, with a weaker focus for the liberal and social democratic party than for the socialist party. Expectedly, we find a distinct presence for the environmentalist party, but we have no history prior to 2017. It is however not clear if, and to what extent, the appearance of

product longevity in 2017 will change the political and societal discourse, but negatively, the absence of durability focus from 2001 to 2017 proves that these perspectives have not dominated. Among researchers, product lifespans have been seen as important at least since the 1990s (Hille, 1993; Klepp, 2001; Strandbakken, 1997, 2007; Throne-Holst & Lange, 1996). One possible explanation for this rather sudden appearance is the introduction of CE policies at the EU level in 2015 in the “Closing the Loop” action plan (European Commission, 2015), emphasising the need for longer lasting products, at least at a theoretical level.

It should also be noted that a mere mentioning of a set of concepts, ideas and measures in a party program says little about the party's real priorities. In their day-to-day politics they might prioritize other environmental tasks, like public transport in urban areas or production of renewable energy over the longevity theme. This is not a claim that durability will not dominate future politics, but it is a reminder that the appearance of the theme, positive as it is in our perspective, is no guarantee for a political breakthrough. However, product longevity has (at last) entered one arena for debates on environmental policy.

Official parliament and government documents show a similar story. Except for one White paper on waste prevention in 2002, longevity has not been discussed much in environmental policy documents. Our analysis of media texts might bring us one step closer to day-to-day politics. Product longevity has not been part of the public debate in Norway over the last twenty years. Only four of the 45 texts we have identified appear in regional or national newspapers. The rest is mentioned in thematic magazines or magazines for specific industries. A large share of the texts is related to the technology and electronics industries. Moreover, some of the texts refer to our own research on product longevity, e.g., on textiles, and some are referring to our ongoing LASTING project, of which this paper is part. In contrast, a search for the phrase “the circular economy” results in 2476 media texts, 1902 of them were published between 2019-2021, which might indicate that the general understandings of and discourses related to the circular economy does not include the topic of product longevity.

Contextual positioning:

Consumption and the consumer

When product lifetime is mentioned in environmental policies at all, it is mentioned in connection with consumption and the consumer. Political parties without a clearly defined consumption focus in their environmental policies or clearly defined consumer policies also lack a focus on product longevity. Up to the 2017 program, the four parties that were analysed historically varied in terms of environmental ambitions, preferred approaches and in their choice of prioritised themes. But energy production and saving, mobility, nature production and international cooperation were core issues across parties. This is no surprise in a Norwegian context, as the country produces hydropower and has had a strong focus on integrating electric vehicles as means of transport. The consumer was not a central actor in these environmental policies, and consumption, households and everyday life was quite absent. The most consumer-oriented aspects concerned energy saving in households and handling of domestic waste.

When the environmental policies are contextualised within a consumption and consumer framework, consumers are also made responsible for engaging with strategies to increase longevity in a myriad of ways that are sometimes conflicting. They are expected to act as act as purchasers, maintainers, repairers, sellers, sharers and collaborators, as well as engaging with waste, sorting and reuse. Similarly, the policies see consumers as active agents (they make choices in the market, they must engage with circular innovations), as well as passive agents (they are confused and must be provided with accurate information). By referring to a multitude of so-called innovative modes of consumption, including sharing, collaborative economy, service economy, local community initiatives and so on, the policies envision the consumer to radically change their consumption patterns (Maitre-Ekern & Dalhammar, 2019).

Operationalisations of product longevity concepts to policy instruments

Along with the increased focus on product longevity from 2017 onwards, we find an increase also in commitment and specificity, although varying across political parties.

Venstre frames its take on product longevity under the CE. The program is very

clear in its pinpointing of the problem: “A large part of the global problems with overuse of resources are due to too much consumption of products with short lifespans”. Hence, Venstre wants to “stimulate the development of more durable products”. It seems, however, as if the only concrete policy instrument that is mentioned is “increased focus on national eco labelling”.

Arbeiderpartiet too, frames durability under the CE theme: “We will speed up the development of a circular economy for the sake of the environment, and because it will help create new businesses and jobs”. The program mentions three tools, but it does not really target implementation, it is more a list of possible measures (even if the party demands the first two): “more eco-friendly product design and materials use”, “repair”, and “consider better warranty schemes in order to secure longer lifespans for products”. The most specific tool here would be the third, better warranty, but here the formulation is “consider” and thus rather vague in terms of political commitment.

The most ambitious and clearly most specific 2017 program is the one from SV. The program holds a strong focus on consumers, everyday life and what we have called the product perspective, and it targets the durability theme more under “eco-friendly everyday life”, rather than under the CE. Their proposed tools are not very unlike those of the others, but they are formulated stronger and more specific, even if SV also uses formulations like “want to” and “it should be possible”: “give consumers expanded warranty/right to complain/ increase warranty to six years”, “increase the retailer’s burden of proof from 6 months to two years”, “make it easier to repair our things. We will have more competition in the market for repair”, “have products repaired by professionals without affecting the warranty”, and “have the municipalities to facilitate for the establishment of reuse and repair workshops”.

Interestingly, SV’s framing also places (some) responsibility for product longevity at different actors. Warranty and retailer’s burden of proof would have to be placed in the legislative, as would Venstre’s “national labelling”. The proposed new rules for opening the repair market for professionals resembles some European initiatives but would have to be implemented within Norwegian consumer/market law. The responsibility for product design and efficient materials use would, in the last resort, land at the retailers, even if there are standards, guidelines and

rules to be followed. The consumers should be “encouraged” to use eco labelling and to choose repair over new purchases when feasible, but this will be influenced by financial considerations, perception of quality in addition to the level of environmental commitment.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have provided three lenses for positioning product longevity in environmental policy, using Norway as a case in point. The historical positioning shows that longevity-related concepts are largely absent from environmental policies before 2017 and the introduction of the circular economy concept. However, this does not necessarily mean that an uptake of a circular line of thought will lead to more policies to extend product longevity. The contextual positioning clearly shows that focus on longevity increases with a focus on consumption and the consumer. The final positioning of operationalisations to concrete policy instruments indicates that when environmental policies encompass a broad understanding of everyday life, consumption and the consumer, policies to increase product longevity are more explicitly defined.

Yet, we still find that even when consumption and everyday life is in focus, there is no clear understanding of the consumer role. Increasing political focus on consumption and everyday life must be done with an understanding of all aspects of consumption; from the acquisition, to the use and disposal of products and services, that taps into almost all of our everyday practices (Warde, 2005). They are never unrelated, and they determine actions in implicit and inconspicuous ways. There is thus a need to move beyond simply stating a myriad of consumer roles and responsibilities (co-producers, sharers, collaborators etc.) and start looking at how we might integrate these ideas in our already complex and multifaceted everyday lives.

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